Armed Struggle and a Better Future: Dubious Connections

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Eritrea: A Dream Deferred
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James Currey in association with the Nordic Africa Institute
2009, 448 pp., ISBN 978 1 84701 008-7 hb, £50

Eritrea: A Dream Deferred has eight long chapters. Statements by foreign observers made in the 1980s provide the justification for the subtitle. Between 1961 and 1991, Eritrea fought against Ethiopia. From 1981 onwards, the Eritrean landscape was dominated by the Eritrean Peoples' Liberation Front (EPLF). Kibreab cites the statements of three authors at the beginning of his narrative. Adbul Rahman Babu (a famous Tanzanian socialist activist and writer), after two weeks in the areas controlled by EPLF, wrote that experiences with 'liberated Eritreans give you confidence in the capacity of the African masses to take history in their own hands during the challenging journey from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom' (p. 13). Basil Davidson, author of many works on Africa wrote that 'emergent Eritrea was the composite of stability and capacity for peace in the region of collapsing regimes' (p. 14). The third author is a journalist who wrote that 'Eritrea's revolutionaries hold out the possibility of an efficient and self-sufficient African nation, run by Africans who have had 26 years to learn from the failures of independent Africa' (p.14). And yet, Kibreab concludes that, by the end of 2007, Eritrea was not only one of the most food-insecure countries in the continent but was also one of the most closed and repressive states (p.394).

How did Eritrea end up in such a blind alley and why? Kibreab informs the reader in a very well composed preface that Eritrean intellectuals are socialized not to wash dirty linen in public. Of course this is not true. There has been a constant flow of critical literature on the internet – some of it quite good – since the defeat of Eritrea by Ethiopia in May 2000. At any rate, the metaphor of washing dirty linen is not strictly appropriate to an academic undertaking (as research worth its salt does it all the time) but it is useful because it explains the predicament of an African academic who is expected either to bend the ethics of research to political considerations or to remain silent. Eritrea´s dirty linen had been aired, if not washed, ever since the mid 1990s, only a few years after independence. Most of the key documents that Kibreab uses to portray the malaise of the Eritrean economy and society are from international agencies such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the World Bank and the UN.

However, what has been kept hidden (hence in need of proper washing) is the steady deterioration of the basic conditions of life (at the political, cultural, social and economic levels) and hence the shattered promises and expectations. In eight lucid chapters, Kibreab takes the reader down the abyss into the blind alley. The book is very well written, even if it makes for a very depressing reading.

In Chapter Two, Kibreab reframes the war for liberation – also called 'the thirty years' war' (fought between Eritrea and Ethiopia between 1961 and 1991), when Eritreans were deprived of all forms of democratic rights (freedom of expression, of movement, of association and of due process of law) – as a war to bring about a democratic government that respected human rights and the rule of law. Further, Kibreab categorically states that independence was not seen by many Eritreans as an end in itself, but as a means to achieving a higher end. The Eritrean people presumably fought for a government that ruled within the framework of a democratic constitution (p.28). But soon after the EPLF and its leader Isaias Afewerki assumed legal power in April 1993, it became clear that the system of governance was far from what many Eritreans have fought for. Isaias Afwerki did not want to be accountable to anyone (p.30). The Eritrean government, writes Kibreab, had enough time between May 1993 and May 1998 to establish a constitutional government resulting from multi-party elections, but the border war between Eritrea and Ethiopia was retroactively used as a convenient pretext for the government's deliberate stifling of the process of transition to democracy.

In 1994, the government promised in its national charter to establish a constitutional political system. It reasoned that for democracy to develop, it was necessary to have people-based institutions, political parties, various grass-roots associations, mass media and decentralized government agencies. But these were certainly empty words. Kibreab notes (p.33) that Isaias Afewerki was unequivocal on one point: for him it was impossible to expect an alternative political organization to that of his own (EPLF, re-named in 1994 PFDJ, People's Front for Democracy and Justice).

The government went to the extent of drafting a constitution and having it approved by a constituent assembly in May 1997. But, then, the constitution was first simply ignored by the president and his party and later it was shelved for good as the country was put on war-footing ever since 1998. Kibreab documents the mindset of the president and his followers and concludes that their commitment to transition to democracy was hollow.

Kibreab glosses over the impact of the humiliating peace agreement signed in Algiers in June 2000, whereby Eritrea accepted the presence of Ethiopian soldiers inside its own territory as a result of its defeat in May 2000. As the war was conducted by Isaias Afewerki without proper and formal consultation with the Central Council, his colleagues (the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Vice-President and others who later came to be known as the Group 15), began to put pressure on him to use the Central Council in running the affairs of the nation (p.34). In September 2000, the G15 succeeded in persuading the President to establish two committees to develop guidelines for elections and the formation of political parties. These were headed by Mahmud Sherifo, the Vice-President. That was the extent of the pressure that the G15 could bring to bear. Mahmud Sheriffo was first sacked from office in February 2001, and then put in detention in September 2001 together with the other members of the G15. Their whereabouts are unknown and no third person has seen them since. Nine journalists who in one way or another collaborated with the ideas and the writings of G15 were also detained indefinitely (pp.34-40).

What are the reasons for the Eritrean government's adoption of policies and practices that are detrimental to the country's national interest and contrary to the promises made during the liberation struggle and the goals set by the National Charter? The most plausible explanation Kibreab could provide is that the president has become a tyrant (although we are not told since when) and wants to exercise power without restraint. What encourages a ruler to become a tyrant is the absence of a constitution, an independent judiciary, an independent and rigorous mass media, and a vibrant and autonomous civil society (p.50). This is a theme that Kibreab constantly hammers in a rather Manichean manner – a society is either democratic or autocratic – with neo-liberal political and economic values unambiguously accepted as the only game in town.

The third chapter, and by far the best researched, examines the intricate relations between the government (EPLF/PFDJ) and local and international organizations. In 1981, a consortium of Lutheran Churches (most of them from Norway and Sweden) established an Emergency Relief Desk in Port Sudan. From that time onwards, neither the EPLF nor the people under its sphere of influence had had much to worry. The Emergency Relief Desk had unlimited supplies, from food to machinery, as long as there was a credible recipient of the supplies. The Eritrean Relief Association (ERA), headed by Paulos Tesfagiorgis, became an ideal partner. ERA was an organ of the EPLF that succeeded in maintaining considerable autonomy from 1981 until the end of the war in 1991. ERA solicited aid from Europe and North America and channeled its material support to the EPLF. On the basis of an assessment of the Emergency Relief Desk and ERA's activities and contributions, Kibreab draws a plausible conclusion when he writes: 'Most of the activities, such as the celebrated health, education, transportation systems, the plastic sandal and pharmaceutical factories, the printing press and the trench hospitals that constituted the central plank of the EPLF´s strategy of self reliance, would never have been possible without ERA's connections to International NGOs' (pp. 106-7). Kibreab then maps the landscape of eight civil society organizations (both secular and religious) and documents case by case how these were systematically harassed and finally closed down by the EPLF. The organizations that formed the Emergency Relief Desk had expected to continue their work, presumably openly and with the support of the newly constituted government. But these hopes were soon shattered. The Eritrean government came out quite early against the negative role of International NGOs (p.124) and underestimated the quality and quantity of support it accessed from the international NGOs through ERA.

The remaining four chapters are further elaborations or, in Kibreab´s words, explanations of the path to the blind alley. In chapter four, Kibreab identifies some of the roots of autocracy in the ideological make-up of the EPLF (later PFDJ). In the course of the 30 years war of liberation, the EPLF developed views on the dependency syndrome, the virtues of self-reliance, extremist notions of sovereignty and its vanguard role in the future of the country. It is indeed plausible that the training that the leadership of the EPLF got in China in the mid- and late 1960s might have contributed to these notions on dependency, self-reliance and the role of the EPLF vis a vis other civil and political associations.

Kibreab explains cogently the mismatch between the Eritrean government´s disastrous goal of self-reliance and the hard facts on the ground. On the aftermath of the expulsion of international NGOs in 1997 and the termination of external food aid, Kibreab, on the strength of a UNICEF report, noted that 53 per cent of the Eritrean population depended on humanitarian assistance and required food aid. Moreover, Eritrea has never produced more than 30 percent of its annual food requirements during the last forty years (p. 153). The Eritrean government's notion of sovereignty is discussed in global terms, but it is worth to note that Kibreab faults the Eritrean government for not recognizing the positive role of international NGOs (pp.160, 164, 174, 189) on the one hand and for its conception of sovereignty as an end rather than as a means on the other. He offers useful analysis as to the nature of the Eritrean economy (with a GDP of about 600 million USD) and a defence budget of 23 percent of total GDP.

But most damaging was the economic impact of the prevailing 'no war and no peace' condition. Prior to the Eritrean-Ethiopian war of 1998-2000, more than 60 percent of Eritrea´s exports were destined to Ethiopia. Moreover, Eritrea gained a great deal from its sea ports as outlets for Ethiopian imports and exports. All this was lost, thus plunging the tiny Eritrean economy on a disastrous path. Between 2002 and 2005, the total amount of foreign investment was about forty million (p. 184). Kibreab writes:

> In forming a new nation, the Eritrean government failed to transform itself from a military organization with no room for dissent, to a democracy that could embrace difference. This outlook was a continuation of the culture of intolerance and denigration of the 'other' that was developed in the war of liberation. For almost three decades the leadership of the EPLF had not been held to account for its actions and failures. By the time the country achieved independence, the privilege of not being questioned had become entrenched as a culture (pp. 187-8).

At this stage, the reviewer is tempted to ask as to why Eritrean intellectuals manifestly failed to scrutinize the democratic content of their organization, namely the EPLF? Kibreab provides extremely revealing insights based on his extensive interviews (conducted from 1992 to 2002) on the political behaviour of the government and on the general views of the Eritrean people of all walks of life. Not only does the Eritrean government believe in the righteousness of its monopoly of knowledge, but many of its supporters in all walks of life concede the government such a right. Kibreab interviewed formally and informally many government officials of various ranks and in different regions for over ten years. He writes:

> Most of them genuinely believe that they have unrivalled knowledge of Eritrean culture and history, as well as all the solutions to the problems faced by the communities. They also strongly believe that the task of the 'outsiders', including Eritreans in the diaspora, is simply to help the government realize the goals set long

> before independence. When this exclusionist approach is questioned, many ask, 'why do you think we fought all these years?'(p.204).

According to this reviewer, the governance that Kibreab meticulously analyzes as a system based on wrong notions of sovereignty, self-reliance and national unity is not merely the product of President Isaias Afewerki and his cronies, to use Kibreab´s favorite description. The EPLF/PFDJ system of governance has wide acceptance among the people that Kibreab interviewed over the years. The threat of demonization of those, like Kibreab, who dare to wash dirty linen in public is, according to this reviewer, evidence of the efficiency of the Eritrean government in silencing its critics and of its considerable support base both inside and outside Eritrea. The EPLF has used the threat of demonization widely since its inception in 1973.

One of the effects of the system of governance in Eritrea today is the growing status of Tigrniya as the official language and the marginalization of Arabic as the second language and likewise of the other eight languages spoken in Eritrea. If the war of independence was fought to defend Eritrean identity as it had developed between the 1940s and 1950s, with Arabic and Tigrinya as the official languages of the country, then that objective was definitely lost on the way. Kibreab argues (pp. 213-4) that this sad development is based on the government´s false notion of the oneness of the Eritrean people. Kibreab does not deal with the implications of such a policy, partly because he is not a historian and partly because it is beyond the scope of his research. But it is important to note briefly that Tigrinya is not only a language; it is predominantly a Christian culture, even if allowance is made to the small but dynamic Jeberti – the Tigrinya-speaking Muslim community that have coexisted within the Christian Tigrinya culture over the centuries.

Chapters Five and Six deal with the demise of the private sector and the government´s domination of the Eritrean economy, probably facilitated by the fact that the Eritrean economy, as Kibreab notes, is very tiny indeed. 'From its inception the EPLF exhibited a powerful proclivity for exercising hegemonic control over every aspect of social, economic, political and cultural life of the communities in the areas it controlled' (p. 230). This was made possible, as Kibreab has wonderfully described in Chapter Three, by the rather unlimited supply of material support (in terms of food and machinery) as well as the uncritical moral support of foreign experts (such as Basil Davison and Abdul Rahman Babu) in the construction of one rather than multiple dreams of Eritrea moving from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom.

No longer did the Eritrean government come to power than it condemned the private sector (a sector that had survived the socialist/communist economic regime of the Ethiopian state) as one whose wealth was acquired when the country was under foreign occupation, through theft, corruption and other similar means without any concern for the country´s condition and the plight of its people (p. 231). With such a world view, the government pursued an economic policy where the private sector, tiny as it might have been, was completely demolished. Whatever was left was appropriated by the parastatal companies. The Eritrean economy fared well up to the war with Ethiopia in 1998. Remittances continued to flow and Eritrea had good revenues from its ports (servicing Ethiopia) and a stable destination for its exports. This state of affairs had no effect on the agricultural sector, where Eritrea continued to produce only 30 per cent of its food needs; but this problem was alleviated by imports from Ethiopia. The economic landscape changed dramatically during and after the 1998-2000 war. In addition to loss of revenue, the Eritrean government decided to introduce a national service system of indefinite duration of all people aged 18 to 50. This massive conscription, described as a form of serfdom, deprived all the sectors of the economy of much needed labour, thus further plunging the country into a deep and severe economic misery.

Kibreab asks quite rightly why a country whose economy has been devastated by 30 years of war and nearly 66 per cent of whose population live below the poverty line of 60 US cents a day, has dismally failed to embrace private sector-led market economy? He believes that the government loathes the private sector because of its potential democraticizing and pluralizing effects (p. 256).

In Chapter Six, Kibreab discusses in great detail the consequences of the government's domination of the economy. The entire Eritrean economy (the productive sector) is under a Trust Fund established in1995 by the president and chaired by him. Kibreab lists the number of firms owned and managed by the Trust Fund, a total of 37 companies (p. 270). These companies constitute more or less the entire economic sector. The sole beneficiary of the Trust Fund is the ruling party (p. 271) – the only one in the country; according to its charter, the Trust Fund Committee has the obligation of handing over every year the profits derived from the Trust companies to the chairman of the Trust Fund (p. 271). Kibreab´s detailed description of the personalization of the Eritrean economy as well as the informalization of power (where important decisions are made by phone) and the complete absence of a semblance of the rule of law gives a picture of a country led by a tightly organized political class whose prime objective is its own survival. Kibreab´s concluding reflection is indeed worth quoting at length:

> The government, by stifling the process of transition to a democratic future, by destroying the diverse livelihood systems, private enterprise and consequently the fledgling middle class, has undermined the foundation on which the country´s socio-economic structure rests. By doing so, not only has it caused irreparable damage to the country, but also to its own medium and long-term interests unless the ruling clique considers presiding over the death of an ailing economy as a worthwhile end in itself (p. 298).

In Chapter Seven, Kibreab devotes a good deal of space to discuss the virtues of civic associations, liberal market economy, political parties, and the rule of law. This is by far the least interesting of the chapters as it has nothing to offer apart from the obvious that Eritrea needs fresh democratic innovations and new solutions (p. 311).

In the final chapter, Kibreab assesses the shattered promises and somehow felt compelled to compare the performance of the post-independence Eritrean regime with the Ethiopian one that controlled Eritrea from 1974-1991. Kibreab writes:

> Actions taken by the post-independence government clearly show that the latter is not substantially different from the Dergue [the Ethiopian military regime that fought to keep Eritrea and Eritreans within Ethiopia as citizens of a multiethnic state with all obligations and privileges]. During the Dergue´s reign, those who survived the disappearances, assassinations by death squads and the torture chambers were transferred to the main prisons. Such prisoners, including those awaiting trial, could hire lawyers if their relatives could afford the fees, and if they were paupers, the courts appointed lawyers to represent them (p. 361).

Kibreab concludes:

> During the Dergue, after the detainees were transferred to prison, their relatives knew their whereabouts, they had visitation rights and in most cases they served sentences issued by courts that applied the provisions of the Ethiopian codes of criminal law and procedure. The term incommunicado detention which is currently in most Eritreans' lips and which has wrecked thousands of families' lives did not even exist in the Dergue´s lexicon. Many of the author´s informants were therefore right to ask the heart-breaking question: 'is this what we fought for?' (p. 362).

By way of conclusion, Kibreab identifies the source of the problem in the failure of the Eritrean government to initiate a participatory democratization process. The process of democratization would have set in motion a learning process that would have evolved into democratic norms of respect and empathy for the other. It is only through the democratic process that citizens and their political organizations, including the ruling class, can get together to seek common solutions to common problems (p.374). In a postscript, Kibreab makes an appeal to his readers that the Eritrean government has presided over the meltdown of the economy; that the country is on the brink of famine and that nearly the entire population is facing an imminent threat of starvation. All this has been brought about by the failure of the government in all sectors of the economy and society.

Eritrea: A Dream Deferred is undoubtedly an important contribution, and by far the most exhaustive. It is an unnecessarily long book with a great amount of repetition. The book could have benefited greatly by cutting down Chapters Six and Seven altogether and by a drastic shortening of the third chapter. Kibreab´s eulogy of the prescriptions of the World Bank and the good that international NGOs bring with them to developing countries is rather uncritical and even embarrassing, as he fails to take into account the growing literature to the contrary.

From the perspectives of a historian, *Eritrea: A Dream Deferred* leaves a great deal to be desired. There is complete absence of a discussion of the state of research. Admittedly, the state of research is quite thin. Nonetheless, not only does Kibreab fail to spell out who did what, he misses all the relevant authors as well. Almost all the issues that he dealt with either *en passant* or as part of his own research have been dealt with by others before. Other alternative issues absent from the text and the bibliography include: Eritrea as a site not only of a single dream but of competing dreams or imaginations (Mesfin Araya 1988; Tekeste Negash 1994); the genesis of the EPLF (Tesfatsion Medhanie 2006); the manufacturing of political consensus in the 1940s and 1950s (Tekeste Negash 1997); the various manifestations of Ethiopian presence and Ethio-Eritrean relations (Shumet Sishagne 2004); the dynamics of Tigrinya ethnicity across borders (Alemseged Abbay 1998). These omissions are certainly not due to oversight; Kibreab knows all the authors quite well. Rather, I am inclined to believe that it has to do with a deliberate disregard of the ethical aspects of research. A good research has ethical parameters and is directed towards the production of new knowledge almost always in relation to what we know or what we ought to know, in spite of the post-modernist assault on the limits and kinds of knowledge that humanities and social science research is capable of delivering,

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